



Closed Early, Open Late

A HUNTING 2001 REVIEW

Snow geese typically stage in northern North Dakota each fall, then over-fly the rest of the state when they migrate south. In 2001, a good share of the Mid-continent population staged in southern Canada, then migrated into south central North Dakota when prompted by an unusual late October snowstorm.

Story and Photos By Craig Bihrlle

Can a hunting season close early and stay open late, all in the same fall?

If such a contradiction *is* possible, it happened in North Dakota in 2001, a year when part of the state lost its waterfowl unseasonably soon, while another sector gladly welcomed the early departures and held them well past the time when ducks and geese typically flee southward.

Weather is always at least partially responsible for hunting season success, regardless of species. For resident game like pheasants, deer and turkeys, weather other-than-average affects hunter comfort and mobility more than game availability. If a section of land has 12 deer, 50 pheasants and 14 sharptails on a late October Wednesday morning when an arctic cold front or snowstorm hits, chances are those animals will still be around somewhere the following day.

Not so with waterfowl. If that same section also has four or five wetlands that host a few dozen ducks and a bunch of geese, by Thursday morning those birds are typically bound for Missouri. Every fall one of these arctic snow/cold fronts moves across North Dakota and redistributes the state's waterfowl, usually to waiting hunters in the nation's midsection.

In 2001, however, the mover-and-shaker front followed a rare path that split North Dakota in half. On the north side snow buried food sources and cold froze most small to medium-sized water basins.

Ducks and geese that were enjoying a rather pleasant fall north of ND Highway 200 on Tuesday, October 23, were mostly gone by sundown on Thursday, October 25.

The snow line disappeared somewhere south of Highway 200 and ducks and geese by the thousands decided to halt their migration in southern North Dakota. In a day or two the temperature warmed considerably, frozen potholes reopened, and a waterfowl windfall below Interstate

94 provided hunting opportunities all the way through Thanksgiving weekend in some places.

The migration oddity was especially evident for snow geese, which typically stage in northern North Dakota and seldom provide significant fall hunting opportunity in the southern part of the state. In 2001, fortunes reversed and hunters from Bismarck to Wahpeton could find snow geese nearby for a month, while hunters in the north witnessed mostly empty skies during that same time.

Among many highlights from last fall, the waterfowl migration ranks as the most unusual circumstance. Pleasant weather following the late-October storm is also worth mention as we analyze the major hunting seasons in 2001, based on observations from North Dakota Game and Fish Department game wardens and field biologists. Most statistical information will come later as biologists receive and interpret data from surveys sent in by hunters following season closures.

Snow Geese

Game warden Jackie Lundstrom's district east of Bismarck contains some of North Dakota's top duck hunting terrain. Last fall, for the last week in October and first week in November, it was likely the state's best snow goose hunting venue. From Sterling to Medina along I-94, and 20-30 miles north and south, Lundstrom witnessed "the largest influx of snow geese the area has ever seen."

Landowners who had lived in the area for 40-50 years, Lundstrom said, had never seen that many snow geese. It didn't take long for hunters from Bismarck to Jamestown to discover the new migrants. Accustomed to traveling north of U.S. Highway 2 for legitimate chances at snow geese, south central North Dakota hunters quickly adapted their tactics and hunting pressure was at times heavy.

"If you ever wanted to try snow goose hunting, this was the year to do it,"

Lundstrom said in late December.

"Success was pretty good around Long Lake, both north and south sides."

Farther southeast, district warden Mark Pollert, LaMoure, reported a similar build-up of snow geese in his region. Though historically a fall staging area for snow geese, southeastern North Dakota has attracted little more than scattered flocks in most years over the last two decades. "This is probably the first year in the last several years when we were graced with the opportunity to get some hunting in with the snow geese," Pollert said. "We had them around for I suppose a good three weeks."

While the birds landed in an unfamiliar area, they were still snow geese – wary and not easily decoyed – and hunting them was not always productive. Some hunters did well, Pollert said, others didn't. Overall, Pollert added, hunting pressure was moderate to sometimes light, not surprising considering the birds stayed around for much of deer season, when many hunters had other things on their minds.

The good fortune of hunters in Lundstrom and Pollert's districts came at the expense of those in Al Howard's district. Howard,

With the exception of northwestern North Dakota, pheasant hunting last season was generally equal to or better than in 2000.

Photo
Omitted

who lives in Bottineau, patrols the area around J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, a traditional high volume snow goose staging area. "When we got that snowstorm early on those geese came right through," Howard recalled. "Up here it was quieter than last year."

Even before the storm, snow goose hunters were relatively idle as many birds that previously staged at Salyer and other northern tier refuges were maintaining a pattern developed in recent years and waiting north of the border in Canada. "I had a lot of calls from out of state wondering if the geese were here yet," Howard said.

Before October 24 many hadn't arrived, and one day later they were gone; an unusual ending that hunters will remember for years to come.

Pheasants

A severe snowstorm can reduce a local pheasant population overnight, but the worst of the October 2001 storm, except for the far northwest corner of the state, stayed north of the state's pheasant zone. Even in the northwest – Divide, Burke and Williams counties – the storm had nothing to do with low pheasant numbers in 2001.

"We lost a lion's share of our birds last winter," district warden Daryl Kleyer, Williston, said in reviewing the 2001 hunting season.

"Last winter" started early with two heavy snow and ice storms across northwestern North Dakota, followed by prolonged cold. By the time temperatures moderated in January, the damage was already done. In 2001, Kleyer estimated,

hunters saw about one-fourth the number of birds they saw in 2000. "My pheasant season was uncharacteristically slow," he said, "the slowest in the 10-11 years I've been here."

Elsewhere in the state, pheasant hunting generally matched favorable preseason predictions.

In the central part of the state, warden Tim Larson, Turtle Lake, said bird numbers were up in his area. While he didn't check a lot of hunters who had a daily limit of three roosters, overall success was improved from 2001. Larson also reported heavy hunting pressure on state wildlife management areas and federal Garrison Diversion Unit lands. Cover on public land was good, he said, so hunters had to work hard for their birds.

Southeastern North Dakota also experienced a slight increase in bird numbers, according to Pollert, with maybe a few more hunters as well. "There's birds around," Pollert said of his district that encompasses parts of LaMoure, Dickey, Logan and McIntosh counties, "but you definitely work for them.... You'll do a lot of walking to flush a few birds and get a shot at a couple."

Much the same situation occurs in Lundstrom's district north, east and south of Bismarck. Hunters found birds throughout the district, "but they weren't going home with limits."

Bird numbers south of I-94 and west of the Missouri River were about average, according to district warden supervisor Bob Timian, Dickinson. Since southwest-

ern North Dakota typically harbors the state's highest pheasant densities, that equates to generally good hunting.

Timian called the 2001 season "busy," but perhaps not as busy as in past years. Hunters are starting to shift to other areas, Timian said, because of difficulty in finding places to hunt. In addition, increased pheasant numbers in other parts of the state also helped take some pressure off the southwest. "That doesn't mean we didn't have an awful lot of hunting pressure," Timian stated. "We still have a lot of hunters, just not as many as their used to be."

Public hunting areas such as Game and Fish Private Land Open to Sportsman lands absorbed heavy hunting pressure over much of the first two weeks of the season, Timian noted.

North of the prime pheasant hunting zone, district warden Bill Schaller, Killdeer, says the 2001 season was "a little better than average," while he noticed a few more nonresidents venturing into his area, north and east of Dickinson in Stark and Dunn counties. Pheasant numbers were better in the southern part of his district, Schaller said.

Sharp-tailed Grouse

Game and Fish biologists predicted a less-than-stellar sharptail season, especially in the western part of the state, and that's about what happened. Preliminary information from a survey of hunters on opening weekend indicates hunter success in southwestern North Dakota decreased

One of the few activities without bright prospects in 2001 was sharp-tailed grouse hunting. Ruffed grouse hunters also found fewer birds. Antelope hunters received fewer licenses, though hunting success in open units was generally good.

Photo Omitted

from 2.2 birds per hunter in 2000 to 1.5 grouse per hunter in 2001.

Opening weekend hunter success also decreased in the central part of the state, but only slightly, from 1.7 to 1.6 birds per hunter.

"Hunters had a tough time finding grouse in the western portion of the state," according to Jerry Kobriger, Dickinson, the Department's upland game management supervisor, "but hunters familiar with grouse and their habitat in the central and northern portions of the state had better success."

Information from wings contributed by hunters through early December 2001 indicate production last summer was better than 2000, Kobriger said, but still below average, a likely precursor to reduced grouse observations during surveys this spring.

"There were pockets of good grouse numbers," Kobriger added, "...this is probably a reflection of the hit-or-miss pattern of many of the summer rain, hail/cold storms that took their toll on nests and newly hatched grouse."

Field observations parallel Kobriger's assessment. Schaller said grouse and grouse hunter numbers were down in his district, which includes usually productive eastern badlands fringe areas. On the other hand, he added, some ranchers reported seeing "a lot of grouse in some places."

In the northern badlands, another popular grouse hunting area, "grouse were way down," said district warden Brent Schwan, Watford City. "There was fair hunting pressure opening weekend. After that I saw very few people."

In the central part of the state, Lundstrom also noticed fewer hunters than in previous years.

Canada Geese

For the second straight year, North Dakota had a statewide early September Canada goose hunting season that targets resident giant Canada geese – those birds that are primarily born and raised in the state. The season ends in mid-September, before any major movements of migrant Canada geese start to trickle in and mix with resident giants.

In much of the state, reports indicate the early Canada goose season was similar, if not a bit more successful than it was in 2000, as hunters learned new or improved tactics for attracting or intercepting small groups of big birds. While the number of people who hunted was

down about 20 percent from 2000, the statewide harvest of 38,000 was actually about 1,000 birds higher than the harvest in 2000.

"Our numbers (of hunters) were up a little this year," said Tim Larson, whose central North Dakota district attracts all three Canada goose subspecies that come through the state in the fall.

Despite the snowstorm in late October, Larson said the Western Prairie Canada geese – those birds that weigh 7-9 pounds and stage mostly on the Missouri River between the Garrison Dam and Bismarck – didn't arrive until the second week of deer season. While the timing was later than usual, those birds stayed and provided good hunting opportunities right up to the last day of the season on December 21. "A year ago (in 2000) they blew right through," Larson recalled.

Perhaps because of a mild fall, Larson didn't notice typical large concentrations of lesser Canada geese in his district. "I don't think the flights came down until they had to," he stated, and then the storm likely sent a fair number through without stopping at all.

Farther east, warden Corey Erck, Spiritwood, whose district covers northern Stutsman and Barnes counties, said 2001 included a busy waterfowl season. "It seemed like there were a lot of hunters out early (for the early goose season)" he said, gauging success as better than in 2000.

Photo Omitted

Canada goose hunting was generally excellent again in 2001, though many birds moved out of the northern part of the state following the October 24 storm.

In northwestern North Dakota Kleyer reports mostly positive response to the early Canada goose season, but he has noticed a change in bird distribution. While the overall harvest may be about the same, it's now occurring during the early season, rather than on opening weekend of regular waterfowl season.

Big Game

The big news about big game in 2001 primarily involved a pleasant run of weather, which was good or bad depending on whether a hunter likes a good tracking snow, or prefers mild nights in a badlands' camp. Snow that fell in October was mostly gone by deer season.

Based on various reports, hunting success for white-tailed deer throughout much of the state was about average, which means a high success rate. District warden Paul Freeman, Walhalla, called 2001 "the busiest season I've ever had," perhaps because of more people out in the field due to a record high number of licenses, and nice weather.

That's not necessarily good news, either, as most of the calls to which Freeman responded dealt with potential violations.

Coincidentally, warden Al Howard reported a similar busy deer season in his district around Bottineau, with more calls than usual regarding violations.

If hunters in any part of the state had a difficult time finding whitetails, it was probably in northern badlands units, particularly 4C and 4B. Some hunters said warm weather made finding deer more difficult, Brent Schwan said, but "those are tough whitetail units anyway. The last few days of the season I started seeing some nice bucks taken."

Bill Schaller also says he heard concerns from hunters about the lack of whitetails, though the ease of getting around, especially in the badlands, likely offset the lack of snow. "While late snow cover is good for tracking," Schaller noted, "lack of snow is not a good excuse for not getting a deer."

Mule deer hunters, Schwan said, had mostly bright reports. "Mule deer numbers are really good and mule deer hunting success was really good also," he said.

Elk hunting, on the other hand, is a different matter. Because of lack of snow in the northern badlands/Killdeer Mountains unit until late in the long elk season, elk hunters maybe had a tougher time in 2001, Schaller said. Some hunters walked a lot or rode horseback for several days and didn't even see an elk. "But that's elk

hunting,” Schaller added. “This (Killdeer Mountains area) elk hunt is not a cakewalk...it’s a very difficult hunt.”

Lack of snow in the Pembina Hills, where another population of North Dakota elk hang out, was mostly a good thing, according to Freeman. With nice weather in early October, elk were spread out and so was the hunting pressure. “Hunters had some real good opportunities to call in some trophy bull elk,” Freeman stated.

The Pembina Hills also have moose, though the population is down some from several years ago, Freeman noted. The agricultural areas south and west of the hills, however, have a good moose population and hunter success there was likely high, he said.

Same goes for the Turtle Mountains area, Al Howard said, where moose hunting seemed about the same as in 2000, when just about everyone with a license – 38 of 41 – used their tag.

Ducks

Predictions for another banner duck hunting season largely held true across North Dakota – until October 24. After that decisive date, success depended on location. Farther north meant fewer opportunities.

“Duck hunting was excellent,” Larson said, though adding a qualifier that birds were not evenly spread throughout his district, but rather found in numerous pockets of abundance. And, the October storm cleared out most ducks.

Many public hunting areas received a fair amount of pressure, Larson said, but added that hunters can still find places to go on private land if they seek permission ahead of time. “We have some quality hunting around here,” he said.

Jackie Lundstrom’s district also contains popular duck hunting country. The nice fall – until the storm – she said, might have led to a few reduced daily bags, but over all it was a good waterfowl season in which hunters could often find mixed opportunities for both ducks and geese.

In the Jamestown area, “The duck hunters did really well... pretty much throughout the district it seemed like a good harvest on waterfowl,” Corey Erck said, adding that hunter traffic, especially in the western part of his district – western Stutsman County – was fairly heavy at times.

From Jamestown south to the South Dakota border, Mark Pollert said that for the most part, duck hunters did “pretty good,” while hunting pressure in parts of his district increased noticeably. “Probably some of the better areas were getting hunted quite a bit harder than they

were in the past,” he stated, “though I wouldn’t say there weren’t places to hunt if you put in the time scouting.”

Northwestern North Dakota had excellent water conditions and duck hunting similar to previous years, Daryl Kleyer said, before the October 24 storm, which didn’t leave much snow but froze most small potholes.

Wrap Up

It will be interesting, as always, to see the final statistics, to find out how the fall of 2001 rates against other recent years, and against history. Will the early migra-

tion mean a lower duck harvest? Will the mild weather during deer season produce greater hunter success, or lower? Will the pheasant harvest approach or surpass that of 2000? Will the snow goose harvest in Kidder County approach a level typically reserved for locales along the Canadian border?

And finally, in what ways will fall 2001 determine what happens in 2002? Finding out eight months from now is a pleasant prospect.

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With a record number of white-tailed deer licenses issued in 2001, and pleasant weather for hunting, North Dakota’s deer harvest may also set a new record.

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